

Living from the Lord's Prayer, Pt. 1
Hallowed Be Your Name
Ezekiel 36: 22-28

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My parents said prayers with me almost every night. They taught me the prayers and we said them together. There was a Mom's prayer. It began "Now Lord, the day is over, I lay me down to sleep." I loved that prayer and we taught it to our children. When my Dad would come in to say prayers, though, he would lead me in the Lord's Prayer. It seemed a more substantial prayer, full of mysteries, with more meaning than I could grasp in the moment. Of course, I didn't understand all of the Lord's Prayer. But if it occupied the great mind of my father, then I wanted to learn it and say it too. In fact, the mystery of it is a huge part of why I liked it: the words called me to *more*. More than I knew, more than I had experienced. I had to grow into them. That wasn't a deterrent but an attraction.

We do children a great disservice when we only teach them words and ideas that are easy for them to grasp. If everything is pitched to me just as a seven year old, then when I get to be 12, all that seven-year-old stuff becomes dispensable. Making it too easy makes it baby and so I will go off in search of something more. What a tragedy when our young people leave the faith to grasp trinkets because their church has kept the treasures hidden away, turning our depths into shallows. That's why we love to have children in worship here, even though we know they don't get everything said in a sermon or a prayer. That's not a problem, that's a success! Value rises when you know there is something more you have to strive for, when you have to grow into it. You know it's worth it because you see how much it matters to the people worshipping around you. People you love and respect are showing how important worship and the Word are to them. What you get as a child in church that is of inestimable value is the awareness that there are high and important things going on here. There is more to the universe and your life than just cute memes or clever slogans pumped at you all week. There are mysteries and depths that the soul craves.

So the Lord's Prayer always felt to me like a manly prayer because Dad said it with me. I learned it easily and said it often. But that doesn't mean I always paid attention to what it said. I didn't always strive to find its meanings. Following the Star Spangled Banner, our public elementary school would give us a moment for silent meditation. I wasn't quite sure what to do in those few seconds. I suppose sometimes I thought about the Miami Dolphins, or a girl I liked. But more often, I

would say the Lord's Prayer in my mind. In those days everything was about competition. So mainly I tried to see how many times I could say the Lord's Prayer before time was up. You'd be amazed how many mental reps I could get in. But I did not think too much about it.

The Lord's Prayer is mysterious in a lot of ways. It's what Jesus taught us to pray. It gives the pattern for a vital prayer life. But it doesn't have anything in it about his cross, or resurrection, or accepting him into our hearts. It's unique to Jesus, yet everything in the Lord's Prayer comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. This prayer is a lot like the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: it's simple yet full of endless depths. It stands on its own, but it also ties together everything in the Scriptures. A child can learn it in a day but the greatest theologian can only scratch its surface in a lifetime of study. People have said it on battlefields and in hospice rooms. They have whispered it on their beds in the midnight hours or heard it sung at a million services. It's also a prayer that requires a lot from us. We have to put in energy and mindfulness in order to unlock its power. It can mean nothing to us or be our very lifeline. I confess that starting out to prepare this study eight months ago, I had a rather ho-hum attitude. Oh, this old thing. Yawn. Of course, the more I studied it and prayed it, the more this prayer shone with beauty and power. Now we get to study it together over the next six weeks. So let's dive in.

The version of the prayer recorded in Matthew traditionally begins, *Our Father, who art in heaven*. And so from the start, we have difficulties. Who *art* in heaven. What? Is there art in heaven? Which art is in heaven? Sculpture? Oil paintings? Pen and ink? Much more simply, though, Jesus' words can accurately be translated, "Our Father in heaven." Or, "Our heavenly Father." The version in Luke's gospel just begins, "Father."

Now, as I said, all the thoughts of the Lord's Prayer can be found in the Old Testament, including the reality that God is Father. But in the Old Testament, there are very few instances where people actually do use this term of such great intimacy and close relationship. The innovation in Jesus' prayer is to direct his disciples to imitate his own use of this very personal address. Jesus opened to us a stunning intimacy with God. We, ordinary, sinful, frail human beings, are to call the Creator of the cosmos, Our Father. We have the claim of relationship upon him. We have the privilege of access granted to beloved children. A mighty man of power might never dare approach the emperor unbidden, but his daughter could run straight to him, flinging herself into his lap. Jesus directs us to exercise this

privilege. Run to him with your arms out that your heavenly Father might pick you up, hug you to himself and say, “Tell me all about it, child.”

There’s a fairly recent worship song that has touched many hearts. Its chorus declares, “You’re a good, good Father. That’s who you are. That’s who you are. And I’m loved by you. That’s who I am. That’s who I am.” The song takes us straight to our deepest identity. That’s just what the Lord’s Prayer does. Who am I? I am not, first of all, my skin color, my city of origin, my earthly parent’s offspring, my genetic package, my education or my current employments status. I am, first of all, according to Jesus’ own commands, a person who gets to speak to God personally, a son who gets to say to the Creator, “Father.” This touches the deep soul longing in the human heart. It brings healing ointment to those who bear the Father wound. It locates us in relationship.

- For those who never knew their earthly fathers, here is the gift of having a heavenly Father whom you may know more and more until you see him face to face.
- For those who were abandoned, here is the Father who never leaves you. For those who were over-indulged and given too much slack, here is the Father who lovingly holds you accountable, directs your steps, and keeps you in the right path.
- For those who were disciplined too harshly, here is the Father of perfect judgment, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, always fair, and always showing mercy.
- For those whose fathers were too busy, too absent, too distracted, here is the heavenly Father who ever waits to hear from you, who always wants to know what’s on your heart.

This is the Father who will not leave you. He confers upon you his family name. He has an inheritance of glorious riches of grace from which you may start drawing. He names you his own. He watches over you, he carries you through sorrow and grief. He directs your steps and labors to grow you into maturity and joy.

Our Father. Our good, good Father. We begin our prayers in confidence that we are welcome and wanted, desired and even longed for by a father closer than blood, closer than breath. Oh heavenly Father, pick me up and let’s talk!

The next part of the phrase is more enigmatic. Hallowed be your name. I confess that even as a theologian this phrase does not immediately signify much

for me. Hallowed sounds spooky. Like Halloween. Or *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. It sounds old and formal and forbidding, like walking through the hallowed halls of Harvard or something. I have to think about this phrase to get it working in my prayers.

To hallow is to make holy. To make holy is to set apart. To set apart as sacred, as high and lifted up, as important, as that which is beyond me but yet calls to me. What is hallowed and holy is of supreme importance.

So in this phrase, we are asking our Father to make his name holy. Isn't that odd? Isn't that a bit like asking the sun to be hot? Or praying that ice would feel cold? By definition, God is holy. He already is important, lifted up, king of kings and lord of lords. Why do I need to pray, "May your name be holy?" It already is. Well, the prayer is actually saying, "Let it be made holy." He means, among us. In the world. Among people. Let me realize that you are God. Let me set you apart as the most important one. And let others do the same. Let the whole earth acknowledge you as God. In this way, your name will be glorified.

For another way to say this is "Father, glorify your name." That's how Jesus prayed it in John 17. Father, you are already holy, but not everyone sees that. Not everyone recognizes you as Father and King, as God and Savior. May they all see and give you glory. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Heavenly Father, make yourself known in truth to every person and creature.

Now there's a fabulous twist on the meaning of "hallowed be your name" that Bible scholar Ken Bailey points out. It's from Ezekiel 36. You may be wondering why we read it this morning. Here's the set up: God's people have been exiled to Babylon. The temple has been destroyed, Jerusalem sacked and burned, and the people carried off from their homes to a foreign land. This exile occurred after years and years of warnings from the LORD through his prophets. Turn from your idolatry and indulgence, enact justice and mercy toward the poor and act like my people or I will discipline you with exile. God warned. The people ignored him. The LORD kept his word and the people went disgraced into exile.

But there was a problem. The surrounding nations made fun of Israel. They jeered at these people who had so proudly declared that their God was Creator of the universe and ruler of all. A God whose people get carted away as slaves is not very impressive. Not much of a god if he can't protect them. So the LORD's name was being blasphemed by the nations of the world on account of their sin and disgrace. In Ezekiel 36, a passage dripping with irony, the LORD says, "I'm

concerned about my holy name. Because of your going into exile, my name has been tarnished among the nations. My reputation is ruined in the world.” The LORD spoke to Israel in terms of the trouble their disgrace caused him.

And then he promised a solution. He said, basically, “I guess I’m going to have to fix you if I want to keep up the honor of my name. I’m going to have to bring you home in order for the world to know I’m really God. But just that won’t do it. I’m going to have to fix your hearts. If I want people to know that I am holy, I’m going to have to make *you* holy!

There follows one of the grandest prophecies in the Bible: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone...and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and obey my rules. You shall be my people, and I will be your God.” The LORD reiterates the greatest of promises in the Scriptures, the promise of intimate everlasting relationship, the promise that runs from Genesis to Revelation: You shall be my people and I will be your God.”

This beautiful promise is wrapped in a bit of divine humor. It’s as if God is winking at them, saying, “If it were up to me, I’d leave you in Babylon. You deserve to rot. But then the nations would talk bad of me. So for my sake, not yours, mind you, I’m going to fix you. I’m going to pour my Spirit into you and make you what you can’t be on your own. I’m going to give you land, prosperity, intimacy, joy and everything you ever wanted—purely to preserve my rep in the world!

Now I note this humor, because we know from all of Scripture that God redeems his people first of all because he loves us. It’s not really about his reputation! No self-respecting god would ever let himself be crucified if he cared about his reputation. No, he cares about us.

And this is the great twist, the real power in the first sentence of the Lord’s Prayer. When we pray, “Hallow your name, Father,” we are praying, “Father, fix us so you can shine! Make us all we long to be, all we were made to be so that your reputation will flourish. Fulfill your plan for humanity by working in us so the world will know who you are and worship you.” Our salvation is God’s glory. Our intimate, fulfilling relationship is what makes God’s name great. Our deepest happiness, the kind we can only get from our heavenly Father, comes when he does what we cannot do. He joins us to himself, saves us, puts his Spirit in our

hearts and launches us into his mission to the world. Father, make your name holy, and do it in us! By making us right, forgiven, holy, and yours.

John Piper is famous for coining the phrase, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” That’s what the first phrase in the Lord’s Prayer is all about. Father, make your name holy by making us fulfilled in you. Glorify your name by creating the joy of intimacy with you. Shine in the world by shining in us.

What great fun that praying for God to hallow his name means that we get restored to the deep intimacy with our Father for which we were made.

Fare forward, dear flock, in discovering the riches of living from the Lord’s Prayer. Dive into your reading every day. Pray this prayer constantly. Share with others in a home group. And let’s watch how our loving heavenly Father lights up our Easter celebration six weeks from now.